DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 197 FL 025 299

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TITLE The Impact of Native Language Literacy on ESL College Freshmen's Writing of Argumentative Essays.
PUB DATE 1998-03-00
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (20th, Seattle, WA, March 14-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *College Freshmen; College Students; *Educational Background; *English (Second Language); Essays; Higher Education; Immigrants; *Language Skills; Limited English Speaking; *Literacy; Persuasive Discourse; Second Language Learning; Writing Research; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS City University of New York Queens College

ABSTRACT

A study at Queens College (City University of New York, New York) investigated the literacy backgrounds of nine non-native-English-speaking students of varied ages and language groups who failed the freshman composition test. Data were gathered in focused interviews (questions appended), which asked for the student's recollections of the experiences of learning to write in the native language, of learning to write in English, and difficulties in dealing with the composition test. Results indicated the students had had extensive writing instruction before coming to the United States, and came from home backgrounds having similarities in writing experience. However, their educational backgrounds varied in emphasis on the function and genre of writing. Formal writing was often connected with study of literature. Students had varied cultural educational and cultural constructions of the writing experience in three areas: interpreting a writing task; anticipating the reader's needs; and developing and organizing ideas. The interviews confirmed some findings of contrastive rhetoric research on organizational patterns, but also suggest that cross-cultural differences are not limited to the organization of writing, but are also shown in how the writer approaches and interprets a writing task and goes about orienting the reader. Contains 19 references. (MSE)

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The Impact of Native Language Literacy on ESL College Freshmen's Writing of Argumentative Essays

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Paper Presented at 1998 AAAL Conference
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Introduction

Nonnative English speaking students have tremendous difficulties with argumentative writing, particularly when used as timed assessment instruments for writing competency. The stakes are often high when passing such tests may be tied to passing composition courses, where much of the writing in the course may have been focusing on encouraging students to draft, revise, edit, and proofread, over a period of time. In many universities passing such exams may, ultimately, determine graduation from college itself.

Argumentative tests typically require students to respond in writing to a controversial statement about a social issue. Writers may be asked to take a position on the issue, to support such with details and examples from their experience, even to agree or disagree with the statement itself. Students' essays, then, may be graded holistically, according to the development of an idea, organization, supporting details, coherence, grammar, and mechanics.

But for freshmen--particularly nonnative English speaking students--to pass such an exam, they must be familiar not only with the content of the topic but also with cognitive and rhetorical knowledge according to the purpose, audience, topic, and genre of the writing task. Although both native and nonnative students are concerned about these exams due to time constraints and cognitive and linguistic demands, nonnative students are overwhelmingly disadvantaged compared to their native peers. Many native students have already had frequent exposure to the social issues used at these exams, they have adapted to the educational system, have acquired a rich oral repertoire, cultural knowledge, and basic communication skills. According to Applebee (1984), many native students have some kind of training at least in their high school years on how to write a five-paragraph persuasive/argumentative essay. They can draw on all these to interpret a writing task, to anticipate audience needs, and to organize their

thoughts according to the academic conventions. In contrast, nonnative students who are newcomers to this country are foreign to the educational system and to the social issues presented by the writing competency test. Many of them have not acquired oral language fluency or written communication skills in English, though they have met the language requirement in TOEFL. They are still in the process of learning necessary language skills and not ready to pass the writing competence test while actually taking the freshmen composition test and being evaluated according to the same criteria as their native counterparts.

Many ESL students come to college composition classes already literate in their native language. In the process of learning to write academic English, their difficulties and problems may be compounded by a possible clash between expectations operating in their home cultures and expectations here. Very often the writing task for the writing competence test creates these clashes which a native speaker would never imagine. However, the traditional literacy programs tend to neglect these students' home culture and literacy backgrounds and instructional models are still based on a monolingual framework assuming that native and nonnative students go through the same developmental stages except for a few more surface errors for nonnative students.

Queens, where as part of the CUNY system, such an exam, the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT) has been used for placement and competency for the past two decades. The WAT statistics for all first-time freshmen at Queens College in the past ten years (1986-1996) showed that the average passing percentage for native first-time freshmen was 73.8%; however, the average passing percentage for nonnative first-time freshmen was only 15.24%. The ESL students' low passing percentage points to the need to investigate reasons behind their failures.

Previous Research

ESL composition researchers have looked into the culturally varied ways of writing across languages and tried to explain ESL students' writing difficulties by using contrastive rhetoric. Proposed by Kaplan (1966), contrastive rhetoric revealed that the organizational pattern in a piece of expository writing varied from language to language due to different cultural values and expectations. Since Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric hypothesis, many researchers have examined the organizational patterns of academic writing contrasting the written texts between English and various languages. In doing so, they also extended his hypothesis into analyzing text structures of different modes such as argumentation (Connor, 1987), persuasion (Connor and Lauer, 1988), reflection (Bichner & Peyasantiwong, 1988), and narration (Soter, 1988). However, while studies so far have mainly focused on the final written products, few have investigated the educational and cultural contexts of the writing in which these students are situated (Carson, 1992; Liebman, 1992; Purves, 1988). In addition, research has not studied the conventions of the agree/disagree argumentative writing task presented by the freshmen composition test, although it is widely used to evaluate both native and nonnative students' writing competence in many universities in the U.S.

Cross-cultural studies have shown that the Aristotlian rhetoric which shapes American academic argumentation and persuasion is not a universal rhetoric shared by other cultures. Matalene (1985) demonstrated that Chinese rhetoric was based on the principle of maintaining a social harmony and was characterized by appealing to the authority in the past, manipulating fixed phrases, and exhorting with assertions. Ballard and Clanchy (1990) also noted the cultural difference in perceiving knowledge and learning which influenced the writing conventions between the East and the West. According to them, while Western cultures view knowledge and learning more as an extension of the existing

knowledge. Asian cultures view knowledge and learning more as a preservance of the existing knowledge. This fundamental difference in perception leads to the Western culture's emphasis on stating personal opinion and on striving for originality and the Eastern culture's emphasis on imitation and conserving the previous literature.

Despite the fact that many researchers agree that writing and rhetorical skills and conventions are normally taught in schools (Purves, 1988), very few studies have examined ESL students' previous education on how to write and the role previous education played in these students' process of learning to write in English. Mohan and Lo (1985) were the first researchers in the field of ESL composition who stated that ESL students' previous schooling might be an important factor in studying these students' writing in English. After studying the writing guidelines and manuals as well as surveying Hong Kong students studying in Canada, they noted a similarity in terms of organizational patterns between Hong Kong Chinese and English academic writing. They attributed the similarity to the language instruction that these students received back home. Reviewing reading and writing instruction at both Japanese and Chinese schools, Carson (1992) argued that schooling made a significant impact on Japanese and Chinese students' development of native language reading and writing skills and suggested the possible potentials for transfer of some of their native literacy skills to their learning of the second language literacy. Liebman (1992) surveyed precollege and college Arabic and Japanese ESL students on their perceptions of the type of writing instruction that they received back home. She noted a preference of transactional writing by schools in Arabic cultures compared to expressive writing favored in Japanese schools.

In all, the literature in ESL composition so far is still focused on the text analysis, the product of writing. Little attention has been given to how these ESL

writers were taught to write in their native language before coming to our composition classes. Facing a steadily increasing nonnative college student population and the challenge to pass the argumentative writing test, we need to address these issues. My research is part of the large Freshmen Year Initiative (FYI) project, From the Margins to the Center: Meeting the Challenges of the CUNY Student of the Year 2000. The project was funded by FIPSE and the Ford Foundation to explore the ways in which those on the 'margins,' students and faculty, must be integrated into the college. Therefore, my study, using the interview method, hoped to reveal insights into the educational and cultural context of writing in ESL students' native languages. My research questions were:

1). When did these students begin to write in their native language?

2). What instruction did they receive in their native language writing?

3). What cultural assumptions govern their interpreting a writing task, anticipating the reader's needs, and developing and organizing their ideas in their native language writing?

Method

After an initial demographic questionnaire given in an ESL composition course in spring 1997, nine freshmen who failed the WAT were selected for interview. Each of the nine students represented a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds which reflect the diverse nature of an urban college. These nine students from six different countries, Greece, Mainland China, Korea, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan, and Peru were all literate in their native language. The nine students had an average age of 22, ranging in age from 17 to 42. Seven out of the nine students were all newcomers to the U.S., their residency in the U. S. ranged from a few months to a little over one year at the time of the study. Although the remaining two students have lived in the U.S. for quite some time,

neither has had much exposure to written English. The Greek student, though she has been in the US for 27 years, has stayed home all these years to raise her children. The other Chinese student, who came to the U.S. five years ago and attended high school here, has been placed in the bilingual program for all these years and claimed that she received very minimal writing instruction in English. Besides their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, all of these students claimed to have had strong oral and written language skills in their native language. Eight out of nine students came to this country with high school diplomas and three noted that they had gone through rigorous academic competition to get into the key high schools back home.

The focused interviews were used as the major data source for this study. Each interview lasted between half an hour to an hour. The questions used for the interview are included in the Appendix. The interview had three sections. The first section asked for the interviewee's recollections of his or her experience of learning to write in the native language; the second section asked for the interviewee's experience of learning to write in English; and the third section asked the interviewee about his or her perceived difficulties in dealing with the WAT. In answering questions, the interviewees were encouraged to make connections as well as make comparisons and contrasts with the instruction that they received in their native language and English.

Although I realized that the interviewees' recollections and reflections may be influenced by their new experiences in U.S., especially writing instruction received here, I think that due to their status as new arrivals, the impact of the instruction they received here will be minimal. Also, I believe by using the interview method, it provided the opportunity for the interviewer to probe when appropriate, to allow room for the insightful commentary due to the casual and face to face nature of the interview (Yin, 1994). Finally by focusing the

interviews on comparing the WAT and the home school writing, the interview method can stimulate the interviewee's memory and get rich data which general questions about writing could not reveal. I was aware that the data collected, rather than an actual observation of what and how the interviewees were taught to learn to write, can only represent what the interviewees say what they do rather than what they actually did. Therefore, the results only present the interviewees' perceptions and reflections of the writing instruction they received before. Still knowing from the students' perspectives will inform our ESL writing teachers' teaching practices.

Results

Results of the study showed that these nine students had received extensive writing instruction in their native language before coming to the U.S. Students responses also revealed that they came from home educational backgrounds that shared many similarities in learning to write. For example, all of the nine students began to learn to write in their native language in the elementary school; some started to compose as early as the first grade. Several students noted that they had received separate writing instruction on how to write by either examining and mimicing examplary writing or by using the process approach. The frequency of the writing assignments, according to these students, ranged from once every week to once every two weeks. The process of their home literacy acquisition follows a similar pattern as native English speaking students, from descriptive and expressive writing in the lower grades to informative, research oriented, and argumentative writing at high school.

However, these students' schooling backgrounds varied in terms of the emphasis of the function and the genre of writing. For example, the Bangladesh student reported that his schooling had placed a strong emphasis on descriptive writing. At the grade three, they were asked to describe a cow and a horse.

Even in high school, they wrote many essays to describe the life and the works of the famous writers. Both the Chinese and Korean students recalled that their writing in the elementary school and even at the high school was primarily oriented toward expressive writing. They were asked to express their feelings after a field trip or watching a movie. The genre called xianwen in Chinese, a kind of expressive writing by revealing the writer's feelings from observing a natural scene, was frequently assigned to the students even in high school. In contrast, the Russian student noted that the writing instruction he received was very controlled and research kind of writing.

The formal writing instruction according to these students was often connected with the reading of the literature, though Chinese, Korean, Bangladesh, and Russian students all said that they had separate composition classes. For example, the Bangladesh student noted that the language arts teacher analyzed a piece of good writing for the student to illustrate writing conventions. The Chinese students revealed that they were asked to study the examplary writing by both ancient and modern Chinese writers. The Korean student claimed that the writing process back home was very similar to the instruction here. The teacher would give a topic and then ask the class to brainstorm before going into the writing task. The importance of reading was noted repeatedly by Chinese, Bangladesh, and Russian students. According to the Chinese students, their teachers told them the only good way to learn to write is by reading good writing and mimicing these models. As a result, they felt very confused and frustrated with the absence of this modeling in American composition instruction.

All the students at the interview noted that differences not only existed in the language but also beyond the language. What surfaced in the interview data quickly was the varied cultural and educational constructions of the writing experience in the following three major areas of writing: 1) interpreting a

writing task, 2) anticipating the reader's needs, and 3) developing and organizing ideas.

Interpreting A Writing Task

Interpreting a writing task on the WAT involves decision making as to what position you take and how you are going to present your ideas. ESL students are often at a loss if they are not familiar with the content of the topic, uncertain about the expectations behind the writing task. Sometimes even though they have something to say about the topic, the agree/disagree prompt often produces a confusion for some ESL students who are not familiar with the format and the purpose it entails. As a result, they have to resort to the expectations derived from their home cultural writing instruction, which may mean a different interpretation of the task and the logic for idea development. One Chinese student, Beth commented:

> Unlike the teacher here asking us to show your point of view or argue whether you agree of disagree, the Chinese teacher would give us two topics, one positive and the other negative. We were supposed to choose one and then argue for it. So when you choose one side and write about it, you don't have to argue why you think this side is your opinion, not the other side; but argue how it is true. Since everything has two sides like Yin and Yang, you really cannot say this is true all the time. So I have difficulty in expressing my opinion and coming out to say this is the best. So the topic itself produces confusion. It's very hard for a topic like this to say one is better and the other is worse. You can never completely agree or disagree. I remember one topic like this: The teenager should not live with parents before graduating from college, agree or disagree? I have difficulty in writing this topic because there are good points such as being independent but then there are bad points like they are easy to get bad influence and cannot focus on their study. A topic like this is difficult to write about and you really cannot say absolutely it is good to live with the parents or vice verse. The best way is to see the good points from both sides and be eclectic about it.

Beth's uncertainty about the topic and the difficulty in settling for one point of view revealed more than a problem with the content of the topic and the

language. They reflected the deeply rooted principle of Chinese rhetoric and the impact of prior education. An examination of Chinese language arts textbooks used in public schools in mainland China, showed an emphasis on using Marxist dialectic thinking skills in argumentative writing, which involved examining an issue from both sides. Obviously, coming from that educational background, Beth's needs are beyond the surface linguistic instruction and she needs more help with topic interpretation and appropriate thinking skills to enable her to identify the purpose of the writing task and to take a position.

Interviews showed that Beth was not alone in her misinterpretation of the WAT topic and her uncertainty about taking a side. Sam, a Bangladesh student, though he was exposed to a similar agree and disagree type of argumentative writing back in his home country, had a different set of problems. In writing this type of essay in his native language, according to Sam, the expectations were that he was allowed to "stand in both boats" and argue for both sides. Even though he realized the need to choose a side and stick to it later in the writing class here, that still didn't help because he found himself having a hard time finding enough ideas to support his point of view.

> When I was at the high school, we were asked to write about these topics like agree/disagree writing, such as the computer. The teacher asked us to tell about computer and why you think it is good or bad. But the teacher back home told us to write about both good and bad points about the computer... In that case, I can do anything, I can just say yes, this is good for me and at the same time I can also say, no, this is not good for me. This is easier to write by stating both good and bad things, because I know what is good and bad at the same time; but if I have to write about one side as it is here, I have to find more points about why I am on that side. So for me, it is not a matter of agreeing or disagree, but a matter of quickly thinking about which side has more reasons attached to it and pick that side. But when we write an argumentative essay back home, we can stay in both sides, like standing in two boats at the same time.

Robert's reflection on his schooling in Russia revealed a strong orientation toward research and informational writing in his previous education. He recalled that the first writing assignment he received was a dictation exercise. Robert reported that in Russia there was not much writing on personal opinions or arguing from a personal point of view. Their composition instruction was more oriented toward research writing. For example, in the 8th grade, he was assigned to write a 10 page long report on World War II; and in high school, he wrote a 21 page book about Tolstoy's life and writings based on library research. Robert still remembers his teacher's words when talking about what constituted good writing: "Pure imagination is not enough, you should read and use the materials well." Because his schooling never trained him to argue from the personal point of view, Robert had difficulty in doing this kind of argumentative writing.

> Since I have not had any kind of experience with this agree or disagree format of writing, it gave me some problems. You see, I have to think about which is good and which is bad. When I am starting to think about it, I am going back and looking for the facts which can approve these ideas, so I am losing myself in ideas and opinions. While writing it, I realize that the other side is correct too. After that I don't know what to write. I know to choose one side, both these ideas are all correct. I was lost in confusion. I am confused at how to approve my ideas. I did not have any training on this kind of writing. Writing in Russian, we have to consolidate facts, you just say what this rule is and then give facts and examples.

Anticipating the Reader's Needs

One of the important aspects in writing is the anticipation of the reader's needs. Many college students have grown up in this culture and have been through the educational system. As a result, they are often familiar with the implied reader and they often learned the importance of making their writing clear and comprehensible for the reader. In contrast, nonnative students, especially those who are newcomers to American culture and its educational

system are not familiar with the reader, reader's needs, and expectations. Therefore, their perceptions of the reader are still based on the assumptions acquired from their formal schooling. In the following, Helen articulated her perceptions of the reader's needs and expectations held in Greek culture.

> In Greek, we don't write the text like it is here. A good piece of English writing is with details and supporting ideas. In Greek, I won't go into that much detail. For example, [the teacher] the other day wanted me to write about the difference between man and woman, woman works harder than man, do you agree or disagree. [If it was written in Greek,] we don't have to put the details like what a woman does. We feel that is very boring, you know, to say what she does in a day. It is always like they [the readers] remind us like "we know what you mean." It's a different way of thinking. If that writing was written in Greek, I would give the words or using strong vocabulary words to say what women do.

Robert revealed from the interview that he was taught to consider the reader's expections by giving hints in order to provide the reader with the opportunity to make inferences.

> Another difference is that here in English when we write a paragraph, we have a main idea. And for that main idea, we have to give details to support the main idea. The details have to be so clear that everybody can understand. But in my country (Banglada), my culture, sometimes, we are not encouraged to give details, we just give some hints. And nobody had any problem understanding these hints.

Beth explained her understanding of a good piece of writing in Chinese based on writing instruction she received back home.

> In Chinese, good writing often begins with a historical background information from the past to the present. Teachers ask us to use supporting details from old times. For example, if you want to write: The soldiers without ambitions are not good soldiers. This topic demands you to give historical examples to show your point, such as Napoleon and many Chinese historical figures to illustrate that those who did not have high goals in their lives, cannot succeed at anything. Very often you don't remember the exact words such as what Napoleon said, but the teacher does not look for those details. We can say that from the past to the present, we have seen many famous figures who used to be ambitious and did not

> contend with what they had and give examples. Then the writer leads the reader into the thesis. You can write about it from different angles to attract the reader and then bring in the thesis.

Comparing writing in Korean and in English, Sally noted that although she recognized the need to orient the reader, she had difficulty in knowing about the ways and how much she needed to do in order to make her writing comprehensible for the reader in the new writing context.

> In Korea, the teacher told us that a piece of good writing often has main ideas and details by using examples. In giving examples, the teacher encouraged us to use the wiseman's sayings such as what Confucious says... By doing that, the teacher would understand me. But here I feel very confused about how specific the examples have to be. For example, once I wrote about a very influencial Korean Ancient philosophy called nihilism. I am a believer of that philosophy. But my teacher did not know. I sense that it is not only that the meaning is lost in translation but also Americans do not believe in that. Words like that makes my writing very strange to the reader. But I don't know how to make my writing clear to American readers.

The above students' words demonstrate varied ways of orienting the reader. The Greek's way of using strong but unexplained vocabulary, the Bangladesh way of giving hints, the Korean way of giving examples, and the Chinese way of lengthy historical background orientation all reveal the different means of reader anticipation in different cultures. While American readers favor clarity, readers in other cultures may favor elusiveness, an appeal to authority and history, or strong visual imagery created by a powerful use of vocabulary. Not knowing the American reader's needs or lack of reader orientation strategies puts these students at the disadvantage.

Developing and Organizing Ideas

Students' recollection of their native language writing instruction also illustrated culturally specific conventions of developing and organizing ideas. For example, in Chinese and Korean as well as Russian students' reports, they all

indicated the need to appeal to an authority in the introduction. Chinese and Korean students recalled that they also need to give some kind of moral lessons in the conclusions for descriptive and expressive writing.

> [The teachers here] asked us to have a conclusion to repeat what we have written in the introduction. In Chinese, I don't remember we do that. In writing responses to the reading, we often ended our composition by extending it to moral lessons such as from reading, I learned ... I also write about what I am determined to do or how to improve myself. So there is no need to repeat what I said in the introduction.

> In Russian, we usually have a very big introduction and a big conclusion. For example, if we are supposed to write about the computer use in modern life, we are supposed to start like this "Mathematics was greatly appreciated by our great leaders, now it is used more in the technology such as computers". We can give a personal example, but not much because the teacher does not value that much of it. We are supposed to give a political and historical background. In the conclusion, we kind of finalize the result. I should prove the advantages of the use of the computer by saying yes, by the examples that I give in this composition. I have approved the idea that I said in the beginning.

The focus on the introduction was also reflected in Peru students' recollections of the writing instruction received back home.

> Writing in Spanish, we focus more on introduction. The introduction is much longer. We were told to write long introductions. But here they asked us for a short introduction but more details in the body.

The Bangladesh student revealed that although they were encouraged to argue for both sides in their writing, they were supposed to come up with their opinion in the conclusion.

> In Bangladesh, we can state one side in one paragraph, and the opposite side in another paragraph. But in the conclusion, it is time to have a vote by saying something like this: Although the computer has some bad things, like a person can use it to commit a crime, I feel it has more good points than bad points.

This late coming of the thesis, though a way of argumentative writing in Bangla is not appreciated by American readers.

Conclusion

The interviews confirmed some of the findings of contrastive rhetoric research on the organizational patterns such as the variation of the introduction and the conclusion according to the cultural values (Matalene, 1985 and Indrasuta, 1988). The results of the interviews, however, suggest that cross-cultural differences are not limited to the organization of the writing, but also shown in the ways that how the writer approaches and interprets a writing task and goes about to orient the reader (Carson, 1992; Liebman, 1992; and Hinds, 1987).

The rhetorical differences voiced by these students further confirmed that writing conventions are acquired through schooling. My interview results also reveal that these differences are still evident and have an impact on these students' ways of composing in English when they are new to academic cultures and are grappling with new academic writing structures and conventions. Thus, contrastive rhetoric needs to take into consideration the process by which ESL students acquired their native language literacy.

ESL students' varied prior writing experiences and their perceptions of a good piece of writing in their native language suggest the need to further investigate these students' previous writing experiences by looking at not only what students perceive but also at what they actually do and what their teachers and the writing curriculum require what they do. By using in-depth and longitudal studies we can obtain a full picture of what really goes on in these students' native language literacy instruction and how native language, culture, and rhetoric shape these students' writing.

The interviews suggested that these students did have some kind of argumentative writing experience back home. Some countries, such as China and Korea also have a nation wide writing examination in their native language as an important element of once a year college entrance exam. For other countries, such as Bangla, Peru, Greek, and Russia, though they don't have the nationwide writing examination, students who plan to go into the field of humanties are supposed to take writing tests administrated by the individual colleges and universities. All this suggests that writing skills are explicitly taught and learned and even emphasized in some cultures. Therefore, the sociocultural and educational background on ESL students' writing development cannot be ignored even when these students change the cultural and educational environment and learn a new set of literacy skills.

My interviews attempted to explain some of the problems that are frustrating to both the students and the writing faculty. The answers to these problems are complicated and the explanations of the reasons behind these problems reveal more challenges to writing teachers. Despite the limitations of using students' retrospective data and a small sample, the findings of the study raise important issues in teaching composition to ESL students. These students' reports reveal the potential for informing writing faculty of ESL students' difficulties and designing instruction to meet their students' needs and academic demands. Two students articulated their suggestions for the writing teachers.

> So if professors know about our backgrounds such as our training in two sides rather than one side, it can be very helpful. I know a lot about students from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Singopore. They have similar educational systems. A lot of them are going to pass this kind of the test for the first time.

> I did not know how we should write on the WAT test. Our teacher explained to us how to write for the class, the composition structure. But besides this, I don't know. I heard that they don't need a long composition.

> a short one about two paragraphs will do it. Some other people said a good four or five paragraph essay which was what I did. I am a little confused. If I know what they need, I can write either big one or shorten it with fewer mistakes. I feel less chance to succeed... If I were to retake the class, I think I would like to see an example writing by the student who took the WAT test and passed. I don't have an opportunity last time. If I know how they succeeded, I can succeed myself.

Implications

An investigation of these nine students' native language writing experiences helped me gain insights into their struggle with writing in academic English and passing the WAT. Obviously the problems that these students have cannot be solved by the linguistic means alone. This study has the following pedagogical implications:

- Since our writing classrooms are becoming more and more diverse, our instruction needs to be diverse too. For example, the problems that Chinese students face vary from the problems encountered by the Bangladesh students. All this points to the need to diversify our teaching strategies for different students.
- The type of home literacy learning interviews as conducted for this study can be used for instructional purposes to inform faculty of their students cultural and educational backgrounds, which they cannot find on the student's paper or in casual conversations. By doing so, writing teachers can not only develop strategies that help these students learn academic writing in English but also help students establish an understanding of viewing academic writing skills as "the particular form that is valued in the academies of the United States" (Purves, 1986, p. 50). Therefore, ESL students don't need to give up their native literacy skills to acquire the new skills but to add a new set of literacy skills to what they already have.

- Explicit teaching of the expectations of the American academic readers and argumentative conventions are necessary. Several students in my interviews mentioned a lack of knowledge about the reader's needs and about the expectations of the test. By using comparison and contrast to illustrate reader orientation strategies used in American academe and the students' home cultures as discussed by Scarcella (1984), teachers can familiarize the students with the expectations of the academic readers and strategies to orient readers in their writing.
- As it is revealed by my interview results, simply asking students to take a side or using the brainstorming technique is not enough to prepare nonnative students for the WAT. Possible invention and idea developing strategies, such as the topoi technique (Kirch, 1996), extensive reading on the social issues, and providing models of successful writing can be used to guide students in the new writing context.
- Is it fair for ESL students who are newly arrived in this country to take this kind of test? Do you agree or disagree? The politics of the issue are complex, particularly now when the test is being hotly debated, locally and nationally. If not, what about the portfolio assessment? Research has shown the benefits in using portfolios especially for ESL writers (Hamp-Lyons, 1994). Portfolio use in this setting cannot only ease the anxiety caused by the testing environment, but also has the benefits of periodically showing the strengths and weaknesses of the writer, examining a range of writing modes and writing skills, and providing the informative diagnosis and meaningful evaluation for instruction.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

Section One: The Interviewee's Experience of Learning to Write in His or Her Native Language.

1. What is your name?
2. Where are you from?
3. What is your native language?
4. Which high school did you attend?
5. When did you begin to write in your native language?
6. How did you learn how to write in your native language? Describe that experience.
7. Name some of the typical writing assignments that you were given back home.
8. How many times did you have a writing assignment in your high school days?
9. How did your teacher back home teach you to write in your native language?
10. What is made of a piece of good writing in your native language back home?

Section Two: The Interviewee's Experience of Learning to Write in English.

1. When and where did you start learning English?
2. Did you ever learn how to write in English? (If yes, describe about the learning)
3. What are some of the assignments did you have in learning to write in English?
4. Do you think your native language and educational background has any influence on your current learning of and writing in English? Why?
5. What is made of a piece of good writing in English?

6. In your writing in English, do you think in English or translate your native language into English? (If yes, describe the process)
7. In what ways do you feel that writing in your native language is different from or similar to English?
8. In what ways do you feel that writing is taught differently or similarly between your native language and English?

Section Three: The Interviewee's Perceived Difficulties with the WAT.

1. Are you familiar with the agree/disagree kind of the topic used in the WAT before coming over to the U.S.? (Explain whys)
2. Are you familiar with the structure of the writing you are asked to produce on the WAT?
3. What do you feel the most difficult in taking the WAT?
4. If you were asked to retake the preparatory course like CESL 31, what suggestions would you have made for the teacher to better prepare you for the WAT?
5. Who are the readers of your writing on the WAT?
6. What are some of the crucial elements to include in your writing in order for you to pass the WAT?

Thank-you Note:

I would like to thank Sue L. Goldharber and Kevin Birth for their help with this project. I would like to express my gratitude to the students who participated in the study. I am also grateful for valuable comments made by Judith Summerfield and Myra Zarnowski in the course of writing this article.